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Real jobs sought for Alabamians with disabilities

By KIM CHANDLER
Associated Press

It was the early 1990's. Jeff Ridgeway, who was born with a mix of disabilities, had started going to a day program at a Mobile Goodwill. They timed how fast he could pack napkins into boxes. They told him he was unemployable in the outside world. It made his blood boil.

"I said, 'You watch me. You watch me. This ain't acceptable,'" Ridgeway, now 49, recalled.

Ridgeway eventually got a job at Bruno's Supermarkets and worked there for 15 years. Today he is one of the state's best known advocates for people with disabilities. He has lobbied the state to put more resources into helping people with disabilities live independently and helped sway lawmakers to rename the once-called Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation. Now it's called the Department of Mental Health.

Ridgeway is now pressing for the Alabama Legislature to adopt a measure that would help more people with disabilities enter the workforce. The proposed Jeff Ridgeway Act would push the state to move away from sheltered workshops — where people with disabilities perform basic tasks often for less than minimum wage — and to put more money into job coaching and other services

Courtney Tarver, Alabama's associate commissioner for developmental disabilities, said the Department of Mental Health supports the bill because the department is moving in that direction. Tarver estimated last year that 4,500 Alabamians with intellectual disabilities were in some sort of day service, in either a workshop or school-like setting.

The bill has been stuck in a state House committee. Tarver said it faces opposition from some workshop operators and some families who fear the disappearance of day programs they've used.

Ridgeway said it is about choice. He said there has been confusion and unwarranted fear about the legislation, and that no one will be forced to work if they feel they are unable. He added that supporters of the proposal will try again next year if the bill fails this session.

Ridgeway was born in the north Alabama city of Athens in 1964. His mother had Rubella when she was pregnant, causing multiple birth defects. He was born with a hole in his heart, suffered strokes and was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment. Ridgeway said at first people didn't really know what to do with him.

"Mama kept me tied to her apron strings," Ridgeway said.

After his mother died, he moved with his sister to Mobile. His sister searched for a place for him to go during the day, and he eventually ended up at Goodwill.

Ridgeway said part of his life's work has been to make people see people with disabilities simply as people.

"We walk different. We talk different. We use canes and wheelchairs. We use assisted devices, and that's all they see. They forget each one of them is a proud U.S. citizen and so am I," Ridgeway said. "Why are we so willing to discriminate against somebody who happens to be a little bit different instead of understanding and working with them?"

Ridgeway has become a familiar sight at the Alabama Statehouse when legislation affecting people with disabilities is up for debate.

"I don't think that there are many people in this state who would have demonstrated so consistently over so many years the willingness to say, get up, take a bus at 3 or 4 a.m. from Mobile to Montgomery to push for what they thought was right. And then get back on a bus and get home at 9 or 10 or 11 at night. To me that is what is

extraordinary about Jeff," James Tucker, executive director of the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program.

Ridgeway has also lived with congestive heart failure since he was a child. Doctors tell him his heart is now functioning at only 10 percent. He said the doctors have cautioned he might not have much time left — but he laughs and says they have been telling him that since he was a child.

"The good Lord can call me home whenever he wants, but until then I've got work to do," Ridgeway said.

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